Athol Fugard has dedicated his art to fighting apartheid. Since apartheid officially ended in the 1990s, Fugard has continued to fight against the lingering prejudices in his native country of South Africa. His plays have become more personal since the collapse of apartheid.

*“Master Harold”...and the Boys* is his most autobiographical play. It relates to an incident that happened when he was a teenager. He felt so guilty about his behaviour that he tried to make up for it by writing this play.

In 1950, Fugard was 17. Apartheid had just started in 1948. Some critics think the play should directly mention the recent beginning of apartheid, but racial tensions had been strong in South Africa for a very long time before 1948. “Master Harold,” being young, may not have understood the consequences of apartheid—this may be why Fugard didn’t mention them directly in the play.

Here are a few notes and questions for you to consider as we read the play. Because it is set in 1950, you won’t be familiar with the music, dance, and famous entertainers of the time (neither was I!). Also, because the play is set in South Africa, some local words and slang are used, which is explained here. Be prepared to discuss them in class. You don’t have to write out an answer, but do think about the questions (maybe talk about them with your friends or parents) so you have something to contribute to the discussion.

p. 1 Notice the unromantic words to the song Willie sings at the beginning. *Boet* means “brother” or “comrade” (the way we’d use “bro” or “dude”).

p. 2 Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were the most famous dancing team in Hollywood. Why do you think Willie has to understand romance through their image? See a video of Astaire and Rogers dancing (in a movie from the 1930s) at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oYh1ycMTAs> This is the kind of dancing that Willie is trying to learn.

p. 3 Sarah Vaughan was a great American jazz singer—some say the greatest of all time. Listen to a short recording of her singing at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYsals4Z1gU> The song in the YouTube video is one that Willie and Sam might have heard her sing. What about Vaughan might have made a big impression on “the boys”? A gramophone is a music player that has to be wound up—the music slows down when the mechanism is close to stopping. “Struesgod” means “It’s true as God” or, as we would say, “I swear [to God]”. Since both Willie and Hilda are black, his remark that only the baby’s hair looks like him is probably sarcastic. The word “hiding” here, used as a noun (“a hiding”) means a beating.

p. 4 Count Basie was leader of one of the most famous jazz bands ever. Their music was very popular with dancers. Hear Count Basie at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbbBeU1vHew>

p. 5 Watch Halley’s relationship with Sam and Willie. How friendly is he with them? Does he treat them as his equals? Do they treat him as an equal? Are there tensions between them?

p. 7 Like Tarzan, Jungle Jim was a fictional character, a white man who battled pirates, slave traders, and savages in the Jungle. Jungle Jim began as an American comic strip and was very popular in the 1940s and 1950s, but gave readers a very prejudiced and inaccurate idea about Africa and Southeast Asia (and people of colour).

p.9 “Bum” = rear end. Speakers of English slang think it’s hilarious that Americans walk around with the words “BUM Equipment” plastered across their chests. At schools in the 50s (even in Canada), it was common for misbehaving children to get “strapped,” meaning hit with a ruler or a paddle, by the teacher or the principal. Young children were hit on the palms of their hands, older children were hit on their behinds, sometimes their bare behinds. These beatings often took place in front of the class. What is Hally’s reaction to learning about how black prisoners are beaten? Does he see it as a racial issue?

p. 10 “Naught” = zero.

p. 11 What does Same mean when he says, “I’m all right on oppression”? What do you know about Napoleon? He helped to institute modern laws of “equality” while often behaving in a very tyrannical way. (Hint: see chapter four of your Social Studies textbook for information about Napoleon.)

p. 12 Why is it ironic that Hally has hidden Darwin in the Theology section of the library?

p. 13 How does Hally react to Sam’s choice of Abraham Lincoln as a hero. Notice that a lot of the influences in the play so far have been from American culture. What sorts of things are influential? On whom? Is there a pattern to this? Why would *Julius Caesar* be an attractive play to someone like Sam? (You may have to find a summary of the plot of Shakespeare’s play to understand this—try Wikipedia or Spark Notes.) Hally’s knowledge of Tolstoy is somewhat scrambled. Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace* 1865-1869 before he gave up writing to become a social reformer, working alongside the serfs on his estate. *War and Peace* is best known for being one of the longest novels in English.

p. 15 Why does Sam know about so many of the great figures of history?

p. 16 “Donkey’s years” is a common English cliché meaning “a very long time”. What kind of relationship did Hally have to Sam and Willy when he was young?

p. 17 Joe Louis was a black American boxer. He competed against white German Max Schmelling in 1936, and lost. The Nazi Party said that Louis’ loss proved that the white race was superior to the black race. When Louis defeated Schmelling in one round two years later to become heavyweight boxing champion of the world, the event was celebrated by Americans, especially by American blacks. It’s not clear if it is Willie’s mistake or Fugard’s in talking about a longer fight. A picture of movie star Rita Hayworth in a swimsuit was the most famous “pinup” during World War II.

p. 18-19 What does the kite story tell us about Hally? What must be going through the minds of the men during this story? What is going on in Hally’s head?

p. 20 Notice how Hally compares a little boy with a crippled father to a white boy with a black man.

p. 20-21 What do we learn about Hally’s father?

p. 22 How does Hally change in his attitude toward the men after the phone call?

p. 22-25 Notice how Hally goes from bad to worse in his treatment of Sam and Willie in these scenes. Why is he behaving so badly? What does his behaviour reveal about him? What are the cruelest things he says?

p. 25 Why does Hally realize he “has got to be careful?”

p. 27 Is Hally’s choice of an essay topic a compliment or an insult to Willie and Sam?

p. 29-30 Sam compares their lives and the dance contest. How does he do this? Explain his meaning here.

p. 31 “a kip and a toss in your old Uncle Ned” = “a snack and a drink in your bed.” Notice that the comics are for Hally’s dad.

p. 34 What does Sam mean by saying, “If you make me say it once, I’ll never call you anything else again”?

p. 35 In many cultures, “mooning” is an extreme insult, a gesture of contempt. What is Sam’s diagnosis of what’s wrong with Hally?

p. 36 At the time, boys wore short pants (shorts) all the time. Only once they were considered “old enough” or “mature enough” were boys allowed to wear long pants (usually around age 15 or so). Earlier, Hally told Sam that he (Hally) had failed at educating him (Sam). Note how Sam more seriously says the same about his own attempt to educate Hally. What was it that Sam tried to prevent? What is the significance of the story of the bench?

p. 37 How does Sam behave toward Hally after his long speech to the boy? Note how Sam’s example influences Willie. What do you think is the significance of the song at the end of the play?

Some critics say that this play personalizes racism, and avoids talking about how racism can damage society as a whole. Do you think this is true? Is it a good think or a bad thing? Why do you think Fugard would choose to focus the play the way he did?

What is the significance of the title?